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Old or young, many of the soldiers, sailors and others invited Monday to the North Chicago Veterans Administration Medical Center left feeling better.

They were on hand for the ceremonial signing of a landmark agreement between the Department of Defense and the U.S. Navy. The partnership ensures medical care for veterans and sailors will thrive at a North Chicago facility that nearly closed five years ago.

Top military and government officials heralded a planned \$110 million VA/Navy hospital as marking a new spirit of cooperation between rooted bureaucracies.

"This is a good deal," said Sylvester Reitmeyer, an 82-year old veteran of the Army Air Corps. "Yeah, I've been coming (here) as a patient for 20-some years. This seals the thing — the VA will be here for a long time."

It also is intended to provide top-notch medical service under one roof to tens of thousands of veterans and sailors, from the rawest recruit to the most seasoned war hero.

A key but untested component is combining and managing as one unit the administration and medical aspects of the facilities, the first such arrangement in the country.

The VA medical center and Great Lakes Naval Station hospital have operated separately for decades but will be fully combined when the latest project is complete in 2010.

"It's new, it's a first and we hope it's a model," William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of Defense for Health Affairs told the crowd of about 250.

The naval ambulatory care center will eventually be attached to the current VA medical center.

The project will serve an estimated 50,000 Lake County veterans and 30,000 active duty recruits, according to U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican. Budgeting goes to Congress in January, and groundbreaking is expected in October 2006.

“It means a lot,” said Lonnie Givens, a Vietnam veteran and commander of American Legion Post 397 in North Chicago.

Currently, the hospital at Great Lakes has about 55,000 naval personnel and the family members eligible for care, most of which is outpatient. Roughly two miles away, the VA serves about 26,000, covering mainly routine care and minor surgeries in which patients are discharged the same day.

The VA already has invested about \$100 million in its medical facilities, including an expansion of surgery suites and emergency rooms. When that is complete in June, all naval surgery, inpatient medicine and emergency services will shift there. Local veterans will not have to go to Milwaukee or elsewhere for surgery.

Kirk, who Winkenwerder lauded for his “incredible persistence” in pushing for the merger, pledged during his first run for Congress in 1999 to keep the VA facility open. A shift of naval mental health facilities to the VA in 2003 was the first step.

“Northern Illinois, unlike other parts of the country, has a rising veteran population,” Kirk said. The partnership brings “common sense” to military medical care, he added.

Kirk and others said combining facilities and management will save taxpayers money while providing better health care.

“We realize that health care is a continuum, and it doesn’t stop when people are separated from the military,” Winkenwerder said.